

from *The Crisis*

Essay by Thomas Paine

NOTABLE QUOTE

*“O! Ye that love mankind!
Ye that dare oppose not
only tyranny but the tyrant,
stand forth!”*

FYI

Did you know that Thomas Paine ...

- failed out of school by age 12?
- was fired twice from a job as tax collector?
- didn't come to America until he was 37 years old?
- became involved in the French Revolution?

AuthorOnline

For more on Thomas Paine, visit the Literature Center at ClassZone.com.



Thomas Paine

1737–1809

Brash, bold, and fearless—and at times angry and offensive—Thomas Paine was the firebrand of the American Revolution. In the fall of 1775, few American leaders dared to advocate openly for independence. Not only did they risk being accused of treason, they were uncertain how the common people would react to such a radical notion. They turned to Tom Paine to test the waters. Paine had arrived in Philadelphia from London only the year before but was already gaining a reputation as a revolutionary writer. He eagerly took up the task and in a few months wrote *Common Sense* (1776), a 50-page pamphlet that attacked the injustices of hereditary rule and urged the colonists to form their own independent country where “the law is king.” Paine’s pamphlet sold 120,000 copies in the first three months. Six months later, the colonies declared their independence.

New Voice for a New Political

Audience Paine’s political ideas in *Common Sense* were not particularly new or original. In the Age of Enlightenment, intellectual circles were buzzing with talk of natural rights and democracy. What was new was Paine’s voice—raw, direct, full of energy. Unlike most political writers of the day, such as Thomas Jefferson, Paine addressed common men—farmers, craftsmen, and laborers—not the educated elite. His straightforward prose reinforced his democratic message that all men were capable of understanding and participating in government. People responded because Paine spoke their language. In his native England, he had worked as sailor, teacher, customs officer, grocer, and maker of ladies’ corsets. He envisioned America as the place where working men like him could have political and economic power.

Limits of Success With American independence won, Paine left for Europe in 1787 to join the reform efforts brewing there. But his outspokenness got him into trouble in both conservative England and revolutionary France. His last major work, *The Age of Reason* (1794, 1795), attacked organized religion and alienated many of his supporters. By the time he returned to the United States in 1802, few politicians wanted to associate with him. He spent his last years in poverty and obscurity.

Legacy Despite Paine’s later decline, his contribution to the intellectual and cultural life of Revolutionary America is indisputable. He was the radical the country needed, the spokesman for new American values and ideals.

The CRISIS

Thomas Paine

BACKGROUND On the blustery Christmas Eve of 1776, the situation looked bleak for the Continental Army. General Washington’s ragtag troops had retreated to the western banks of the Delaware River. Tom Paine was camped with them. The British were within striking distance of Philadelphia, and Washington knew he had to advance the next day or risk losing the war. To boost the morale of his ill-equipped and outnumbered soldiers, he ordered his officers to read aloud the following essay, which Paine had written the day before.

ANALYZE VISUALS

A minuteman was pledged to be ready to fight on a minute’s notice. What does this suggest about the preparedness of the colonists?

tyranny (tīr’ə-nē) *n.*
cruel and oppressive
government or rule

esteem (ī-stēm’) *v.* to set
a high value on

celestial (sə-lēs’chəl) *adj.*
heavenly

A PERSUASIVE TECHNIQUES

Identify the **loaded language**—words with strong connotations—in lines 1–12. Then paraphrase the lines using neutral language.

These are the times that try men’s souls: The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it NOW, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. **Tyranny**, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we **esteem** too lightly:—’Tis dearness only that gives every thing its value. Heaven knows how to set a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed, if so **celestial** an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated. Britain, with an army to enforce her tyranny, has declared, that she has a right (*not only to TAX*) but “to BIND us in 10 ALL CASES WHATSOEVER,”¹ and if *being bound in that manner* is not slavery, then there is not such a thing as slavery upon earth. Even the expression is impious, for so unlimited a power can only belong to God. **A**

1. “to BIND us in ALL CASES WHATSOEVER”: a reference to wording in the Declaratory Act of 1766, in which the British parliament asserted its “power and authority” to make and enforce laws over the American colonies.

Whether the Independence of the Continent was declared too soon, or delayed too long, I will not now enter into as an argument; my own simple opinion is, that had it been eight months earlier, it would have been much better. We did not make a proper use of last winter, neither could we, while we were in a dependant state. However, the fault, if it were one, was all our own; we have none to blame but ourselves. But no great deal is lost yet; all that Howe has been doing for this month past is rather a ravage than a conquest which the spirit of the Jerseys a year ago would have quickly repulsed, and which time and a little resolution will soon recover. **B**

I have as little superstition in me as any man living, but my secret opinion has ever been, and still is, that God almighty will not give up a people to military destruction, or leave them unsupportedly to perish, who had so earnestly and so repeatedly sought to avoid the calamities of war, by every decent method which wisdom could invent. Neither have I so much of the **infidel** in me, as to suppose, that he has **relinquished** the government of the world, and given us up to the care of devils; and as I do not, I cannot see on what grounds the king of Britain can look up to heaven for help against us: A common murderer, a highwayman, or a housebreaker, has as good a pretense as he. . . .

I once felt all that kind of anger, which a man ought to feel, against the mean principles that are held by the Tories:² A noted one, who kept a tavern at Amboy,³ was standing at his door, with as pretty a child in his hand, about eight or nine years old, as most I ever saw, and after speaking his mind as freely as he thought was **prudent**, finished with this unfatherly expression, “*Well! give me peace in my day.*” Not a man lives on the Continent but fully believes that a separation must some time or other finally take place, and a generous parent would have said, “*If there must be trouble, let it be in my day, that my child may have peace;*” and this single reflection, well applied, is sufficient to awaken every man to duty. Not a place upon earth might be so happy as America. Her situation is remote from all the **wrangling** world, and she has nothing to do but trade with them. A man may easily distinguish in himself between temper and principle, and I am as confident, as I am that God governs the world, that America will never be happy until she gets clear of foreign **dominion**. Wars, without ceasing, will break out until that period arrives, and the Continent must in the end be conqueror; for, though the flame of liberty may sometimes cease to shine, the coal never can expire. . . . **C**

I turn with the warm **ardor** of a friend to those who have nobly stood, and are yet determined to stand the matter out: I call not upon a few, but upon all; not on this State or that State, but on every State; up and help us; lay your shoulders to the wheel; better have too much force than too little, when so great an object is at stake. Let it be told to the future world, that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive, that the city and the country, alarmed at one

B MAIN IDEAS AND SUPPORT

How does Paine support his main idea that all is not lost for the colonists, despite their military defeats?

infidel (ɪnˈfɪ-dəl) *n.* a person with no religious beliefs

relinquish (rɪ-lɪŋgˈkwɪʃ) *v.* to withdraw from; to give up

prudent (prʊdˈnt) *adj.* showing caution or good judgment

wrangling (ræŋgˈɡlɪŋ) *adj.* arguing noisily
wrangle *v.*

dominion (də-mɪnˈyən) *n.* control; authority over

C PERSUASIVE TECHNIQUES

Notice that Paine makes an **ethical appeal** in lines 31–39. How does he say a parent should behave?

ardor (ärˈdər) *n.* intense enthusiasm; passion

2. **the mean principles . . . Tories:** the small-minded beliefs of those colonists who remain loyal to Great Britain.

3. **Amboy:** probably Perth Amboy, a town in New Jersey.

What signifies it to me, whether he who does it, is a king or a common man; my
70 countryman or not my countryman? whether it is done by an individual villain,
or an army of them? If we reason to the root of things we shall find no difference;
neither can any just cause be assigned why we should punish in the one case, and
pardon in the other. Let them call me rebel, and welcome, I feel no concern from
it; but I should suffer the misery of devils, were I to make a whore of my soul by
swearing allegiance to one, whose character is that of a sottish, stupid, stubborn,
worthless, brutish man. I conceive likewise a horrid idea in receiving mercy from a
being, who at the last day shall be shrieking to the rocks and mountains to cover him,
and fleeing with terror from the orphan, the widow and the slain of America.

There are cases which cannot be overdone by language, and this is one. There
80 are persons too who see not the full extent of the evil that threatens them; they
solace themselves with hopes that the enemy, if they succeed, will be merciful.
It is the madness of folly to expect mercy from those who have refused to do
justice; and even mercy, where conquest is the object, is only a trick of war: The
cunning of the fox is as murderous as the violence of the wolfe; and we ought
to guard equally against both. Howe's first object is partly by threats and partly
by promises, to terrify or seduce the people to deliver up their arms, and receive
mercy. The ministry recommended the same plan to Gage, and this is what the
Tories call making their peace; *"a peace which passeth all understanding"* indeed!
A peace which would be the immediate forerunner of a worse ruin than any we
90 have yet thought of. Ye men of Pennsylvania, do reason upon those things! Were
the back counties to give up their arms, they would fall easy prey to the Indians,
who are all armed: This perhaps is what some Tories would not be sorry for.
Were the home counties to deliver up their arms, they would be exposed to the
resentment of the back counties, who would then have it at their power to chastise
their defection at pleasure. And were any one State to give up its arms, that State
must be garrisoned by all Howe's army of Britons and Hessians to preserve it from
the anger of the rest. Mutual fear is a principal link in the chain of mutual love,
and woe be the State that breaks the compact. Howe is mercifully inviting you to
barbarous destruction, and men must be either rogues or fools that will not see it.
100 I dwell not upon the vapours of imagination; I bring reason to your ears; and in
language, as plain as A, B, C, hold up truth to your eyes. **E**

I thank God that I fear not. I see no real cause for fear. I know our situation
well, and can see the way out of it. While our army was collected, Howe dared not
risk a battle, and it is no credit to him that he decamped from the White Plains,
and waited a mean opportunity to ravage the defenceless Jerseys; but it is great
credit to us, that, with an handful of men, we sustained an orderly retreat for near
an hundred miles, brought off our ammunition, all our field-pieces, the greatest
part of our stores, and had four rivers to pass. None can say that our retreat was

E **PERSUASIVE
TECHNIQUES**

Reread lines 79–101.

What statement does Paine make about the use of language at the beginning of this paragraph? What does this tell you about his use of **emotional appeals** and loaded language in this piece?



Washington Crossing the Delaware (1851), Eastman Johnson. Copy after the Emmanuel Leutze painting in the Metropolitan Museum, New York. Private collection. © Art Resource, New York.

precipitate, for we were near three weeks in performing it, and the country might
 110 have time to come in. Twice we marched back to meet the enemy and remained
 out till dark. The sign of fear was not seen in our camp, and had not some of the
 cowardly and disaffected inhabitants spread false alarms through the country, the
 Jerseys had never been ravaged. Once more we are again collected and collecting;
 our new army at both ends of the Continent is recruiting fast, and we shall be
 able to open the next campaign with sixty thousand men, well armed and clothed.
 This is our situation, and who will may know it. By perseverance and fortitude
 we have the prospect of a glorious issue; by cowardice and submission, the sad
 choice of a variety of evils—a ravaged country—a depopulated city—habitations
 without safety, and slavery without hope—our homes turned into barracks and
 120 bawdy-houses for Hessians, and a future race to provide for whose fathers we shall
 doubt of. Look on this picture, and weep over it!—and if there yet remains one
 thoughtless wretch who believes it not, let him suffer it unlamented. ∞ F

ANALYZE VISUALS

What figures and objects are emphasized by the **composition**, or the arrangement of shapes? Consider what this emphasis adds to the painting's meaning.

F MAIN IDEAS AND SUPPORT

The main idea is stated in the first line of this paragraph. What evidence does Paine give to support the idea that there is no cause for fear?